

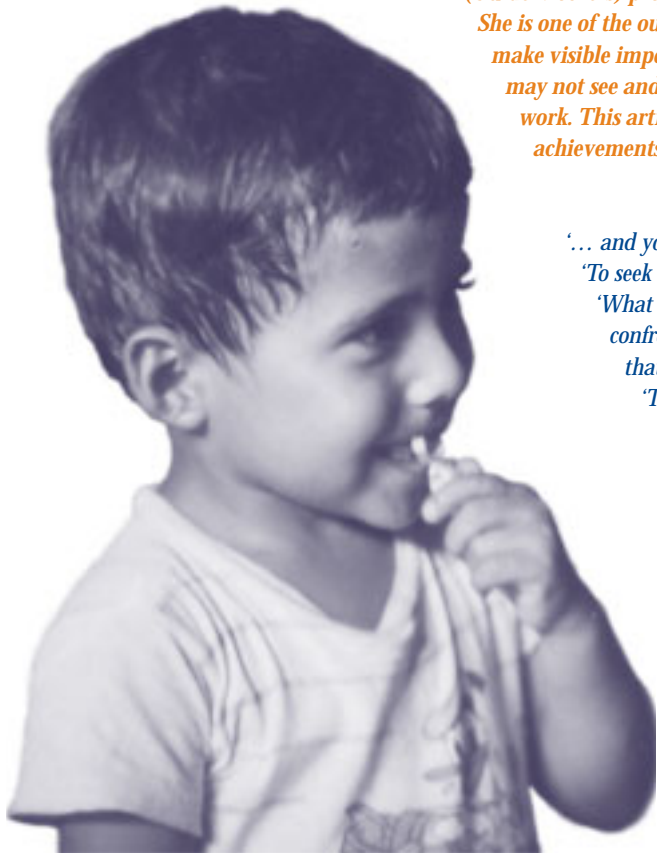
Honduras: the Madres Guías of La Huerta

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The author joined the Christian Children's Fund Honduras (CCFH) Effectiveness Initiative (EI) team, in the study of the Madres Guías (Guide Mothers) project in the community of La Huerta, Honduras. She is one of the outsiders in the team, whose principle job is to help make visible important aspects of what is happening that insiders may not see and take into account because they are too close to the work. This article presents the author's views on some of the project's achievements.

*'... and you, why do you want a boat, if I may ask?' asked the king ...
'To seek the unknown island' replied the man.
'What unknown island?' asked the king, hiding his smile as though confronted with a kind of madman with a mania for voyages – the type that, right from the very start, you know you should not thwart.
'The unknown island' repeated the man.
'But there are no unknown islands! They are all on the maps.'
'Only the known islands are on the maps'
'And what unknown island are you speaking of?'
'If I could tell you that, it would not be unknown.'*

The story of the unknown island
José Saramago



“ *this has not excluded the use of an ad hoc analytical framework* ”

The EI process in Honduras and its phases

So how has it gone, this search for unknown elements, or success factors or possible keys to effectiveness that have perhaps been intuited, but that have been invisible or undocumented until now? It has been useful to have a general analytical framework for the Effectiveness Initiative (EI). But more useful is the fact that this has not excluded the use of an *ad hoc* analytical framework in Honduras. This has guided the search for local experiences – something that has made it possible to take account of local realities and specifics. One resource that has helped to orientate both the search and the interpretation of its findings has been

the formulation of what we called the ‘wild hypothesis’, the conjectures and suspicions that the first analyses of some data awoke in us. It has functioned as a kind of pattern or first map to help us achieve a more rigorous confirmation of our findings.

Essentially, the investigative process has organised itself around establishing relationships between:

- the objectives of the study;
- the instruments used in the study;
- the findings;
- the formulation of hypotheses;
- the confirmation of gaps in information; and
- feedback for the next steps in the search.

In order to establish these relationships the following list of questions was developed to guide the process of gathering, recording, processing and analysing the information.

- Why are we investigating what we are investigating?
- What do we want to investigate?
- What are the instruments we should use, and how should we use them?
- How do we organise the data we obtain?
- How do we analyse these data?
- How do we return the results of our search to the sources so that they can be validated?
- How do we systematise the results of the validation?
- Which are the important findings to share with others and why?

- How and to whom should we disseminate these important findings?

We see these as links and we understand their relevance by chaining them together logically. This is because it is the connections between them, combined with constant feedback to each level of the project, that produce a continuous process that results in the generation and recording of lessons.

The tools that we used

In the study, we used a ‘tool kit’ for each of its different phases; and we involved different people in each phase as well. The following tables (page 18) make this clear.

Phase: mapping the information

Tool	Activity	Participants
The river	Charting the story of the project	- Project EI Team
Roses and thorns	Constructing a living image of the Madres Guías	- Madres Guías
The mural	Presenting images of the community	- Children
Fishing	Generating images of the Madres Guías The Madres Guías' concepts Listening to our children Listening to parents	- Madres Guías - Madres Guías - School children - Parents
Looking at images	Children expressing their opinions	- Preschool children
Structured and semi-structured interviews	Interviews	- Active Madres Guías - Inactive Madres Guías - Former and present members of the Parents' Committee - Project personnel - External consultants
Card games	Exploring the importance of tasks	- Madres Guías
Survey	Seeking opinions	- Mothers
The album	Making a qualitative profile of the guiding mother	- Madres Guías

Phase: returning and validating the information

Tool	Participants
Group discussions aided by graphics about the results produced through the activities	- Madres Guías and mothers - School children - Parents

Phase: organisation and analysis of data

Tool	Objective
Transcribing	To recover the data
Matrix	To systematise the data and tools
Anthropological perspective	To obtain a new vision of the data
Categorising according to thematic areas	To enable a deeper analysis of the data
Glossary	To establish common meanings

The findings: in search of the lost island

The 'wild hypothesis' that I described earlier was a useful stage in helping us to understand what we were discovering. Also important was the development of common meanings

between all of those involved, insiders or outsiders. But central to our investigation has been the formulation of two plans for analysing the data. The first of these is about the Madres Guías project itself, and the second covers the processes of the CCFH team, both in documenting this work and in its

Plan for analysing data	Findings	Lessons learned
The Madres Guías project: identification of the keys to effectiveness	By areas (identified categories) By actors involved From qualitative and quantitative results of processes	
The EI research in the Madres Guías project: the process and its impact on the Madres Guías project and organisation	By phases By actors involved By method used By effects produced on the project, on the organisation, on the actors	

participation in the EI. The table above shows the basic structure of these two plans, relating their intent to the kinds of findings that were sought, and the ways in which they were sought.

Questionings, first findings and lessons

The remainder of this article deals with the themes/topics that have arisen in the EI work within the project so far. Much of the content comes from the discussions of the CCFH EI team, but some is from me alone. It is all about hypothesis, findings or questions. Everything is still open and will be modified in the future as our analyses become more profound.

Empowerment and self-esteem

The Madres Guías value the knowledge they have acquired, the roles they have developed, and the recognition they have received from the community over the years that the project has been operating. All of this strengthens their self-esteem as people, their sense of value in their families, and their sense of worth as contributors to positive changes in their community. In addition, the manuals they received from the project are perceived and used as 'the books of truth' and heighten both the status and the trust that the Madres Guías enjoy from the other mothers.

The Madres Guías project has a system of prizes as a way of validating and recognising the Madres Guías' efforts. Such non-monetary incentives serve to reinforce the act of volunteering. In this sense, the project has become a space in which the talents of the community are being rediscovered and brought back into use.

The act of returning the information produced by the investigation to the Madres Guías has had a great impact on their motivation: it makes them feel more appreciated and valued. In addition, this act of returning becomes part of sharing the investigative experience. In fact, the Madres Guías are so interested in the information that some of them asked for copies of the folders containing the results of the techniques (fishing, for example) so they could keep them to study in their own homes.

Participation

The Madres Guías project establishes functions for each of the actors involved, and makes a point of clearly communicating the 'rules of the game'. This contributes to the community being better disposed towards the project and to a greater degree of participation by all members of the

community. One example that supports this view is that the community elects the Madres Guías to serve as such, and also elects them to serve on the Parents' Committees. Hypothetically at least, we feel that these are affirmations of the effectiveness of the ways in which the project promotes cooperation.

Community monitoring

We have also been interested in community monitoring and models of management that are based on the interchanges of lessons learned between the community and organisations such as CCFH. To explore this, we asked questions such as, 'Is there any relation between the quality of service that the project supplies, and the role of community participation in monitoring early childhood care and development projects?'

Leadership/Culture of respect for hierarchies

The members of the CCFH team saw a tendency to respect hierarchies in the various actors in the community that is characteristic of the national culture. In the socio-linguistic context of the region, there is a leaning towards subordination that can be seen in terms such as 'teacher', 'president' and



Honduras: Paola of the La Huerta community
photo: Elaine Menotti, former Hart fellow with CCF Honduras

'director'. In substituting these by terms such as 'kindergarten worker' or 'coordinator of the Parents Committee', the project attempted to reduce the sense of hierarchy in favour of something more horizontal and therefore more appropriate to cooperation.

The project is introducing changes in some of the community's cultural patterns. For example, a more active participation by women. In this sense, the mediating role of CCFH is an important resource because it promotes participation generally, and also brings in the idea of negotiation as a real process for decision-making.

In the case of the Madres Guías, their skills give them status with the mothers because they increase their credibility. At the same time, the fact that they have the 'seal of approval' from CCFH, is something significant that strengthens general confidence in the implementation of the programme.

Leadership and power

A variety of reflections emerged about the types of leadership within the project, especially in the case of the

Madres Guías and the Parents' Committee. In this sense, it seems that the community's idea of who has real power – and therefore real leadership – is linked to who has control of resources. At the same time, the leadership – and therefore the power – that the Madres Guías have in the community is different in nature: it comes from their control of information. Hypothetically, the project links two types of power (or leadership): economic power, via the Parents' Committee; and the power inherent in the control of information by the Madres Guías. However, although the project has had an influence by positively encouraging leadership, communities still link power with political parties; something that is, once again, a product of the socio-cultural characteristics of the region.

The profile of the Madres Guías

From the results we have obtained, we can see that the community respects the Madres Guías and recognises the worth of their work. The Madres Guías are seen as leaders, and have great power to mobilise the community. They also show more resilience than other women.

However, within the project we encountered young single women without children who were or had been Madres Guías. These were not accepted by the community, nor shown respect by the mothers. But the project has had to use them because there have not been enough mothers in the community willing to become Madres Guías.

We feel it is important to reflect more on this reality, or investigate it further. After all, many of these young women carry out the role of mothers for their smaller siblings. In addition, it is a feature of the project to ensure that all of the women who guide are properly trained to support mothers. One idea that remains a question is whether these young women could promote a new line of development in the project: that of reducing the incidence of pregnancy among young women, or of ensuring that they are better prepared to become mothers. It would also be useful to find out why there are insufficient mothers who are willing to become Madres Guías.

Training

Training is the crux of the project, the point at which all the other themes/topics that we have discussed

interact with each other. A large quantity of printed materials supports the training and emphasises its importance to the project. These materials are updated periodically.

The Madres Guías use both technical and colloquial language appropriately. On the technical side, this could be the result of long and ongoing training in areas such as basic care of children.

In the case of Madres Guías who cannot read, or do so with difficulty, the drawings that are included in the training materials complement what they are able to read while their trainers reinforce what they learn with other materials.

Communication

The manuals that the Madres Guías use represent a resource through which the project communicates their functions and their competencies. They also contain programmed content for each of the thematic areas. However, it is important to recognise that the oral tradition predominates in the activities that the Madres Guías run with the mothers. In this respect, we could ask, 'What is the effect or influence of the

oral tradition on the effectiveness of interventions, where the incidence of non-literacy or illiteracy is high?' and 'Given that the oral tradition is significant in transferring knowledge, does it influence the effectiveness or quality of the activities, and does it have any effect on the sustainability of the project?'

The symbolic

The 'symbolic' is about attributing strength and power to some activities and some figures who participate in the project. It is especially associated with the Madres Guías. For example, they are seen as models for the other mothers, for families and generally for other members of the community too. This is because of who each of them is and what they do in early childhood care and development. This is reinforced by ceremonies. For example, there is a ceremony at which each receives the manuals, bags and boxes of materials that legitimise their roles as Madres Guías, and another as the children enter the kindergarten and are received by the kindergarten workers. This latter ceremony reinforces a commitment between Madres Guías and kindergarten workers.

The significance of religious beliefs and practices also has to be considered. Do these impact positively on the dedication and commitment of the Madres Guías?

Constructing a story without end

These are the achievements of the project to date as they seem to me, an outsider. Now we have to return to the original data and analyse it afresh, fortified by the findings and lessons that we have learned from our analyses so far. And we should also think about extending the search for underlying effectiveness into communities other than La Huerta.

In terms of the EI, what is needed now is to share these findings and lessons. The objective is to identify differences and similarities as part of capitalising on our collective learning through the EI. In this way we shall discover new clues that will help us in our search for that unknown island. ○